

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

INFORMANT: PAULINE GOLEC [POLAND]

INTERVIEWERS: CHRISTOPH STROBEL, CRAIG THOMAS, YINGCHAN ZHANG

DATE: APRIL 16, 2008

Z = YINGCHAN ZHANG

G = PAULINE GOLEC

S = CHRISTOPH STROBEL

T = CRAIG THOMAS

Tape 08.27

Z: Would you please tell us a little bit about yourself?

G: I am the granddaughter of Polish immigrants on both my mother and father's side. Both my parents were American-born and my mom was born in Lowell, Mass. I was born in Lawrence, MA in a very small hospital that was on the line between Lawrence and Methuen. Shortly after my parents married, my parents lived in Salem, New Hampshire as my dad was helping his parents run a small inn which they owned and which was located in Salem. When it was time for me to be born, my mother, given a choice between a hospital in NH or MA, preferred that I be born in Massachusetts. Shortly after my birth, my parents moved back to Lowell. I grew up in Lowell, and there attended a parochial school and later went to Lowell High School. I attend the same church today which I attended as a child and where I was confirmed. After high school, I attended Lowell State College before it became the University of Lowell (later to become UMass Lowell). I received my master's degree from Northeastern University. I taught in Arlington, MA for thirty-nine years, living locally and commuting the whole while. After retiring from the Arlington School System, I became a museum teacher, part time, at the Tsongas Industrial History Center. I continue to be involved a many local activities. I love this area. Previously, I lived in Lowell close to Dracut, and in 1983, I bought a house in Dracut fairly close to Lowell. My ethnicity, I grew up speaking English at home and Polish at my grandmothers' houses (particularly at my maternal grandmother's home as I saw her more frequently). The parochial school I attended was staffed by a Polish order on nuns (Felician Sisters, a Franciscan branch). We had Polish language class, learned some Polish songs, but everything else was in English. As an adult I've been involved in the Lowell Folk Festival as Ethnic Chair of the Festival while

continuing some involvement with the Polish booth at the Festival. Before that, I was chair of the Polish booth at the Regatta Ethnic Festivals, the forerunner of today's Lowell Folk Festival. The Regatta was held on the banks of the Merrimack (Regatta Field on Pawtucket Blvd) and, while it did have some music, it emphasized the various foods of Lowell's ethnic communities. Shortly after the National Park came to Lowell in 1978, and beginning in the early 80's, I think, there were small ethnic festivals, featuring a different ethnic group or two, every summer weekend in downtown Lowell at Lucy Larcom Parkway adjacent to Lowell High School. Then the National Folk Festival came, stayed for three years, and was followed by the current Lowell Folk Festival, now in its 22nd year. I've been involved every year since 1974 in one festival or another.

Z: You mentioned that your grandparents came to Lowell as immigrants. Did they talk about their experience?

G: I think that I learned about their experiences, not necessarily from them but from their children as filtered through what they, my parents, aunts, uncles, remember. Also, your own interest might affect how much you remember of anything. They came and they worked hard. My maternal grandfather died when he was about forty-two. I believed that he went to Pennsylvania first, might have worked briefly as a miner, and then came to Lowell. He married my grandmother and soon had a wood yard and a grocery store. He was active in Polish civic affairs and was an officer in some organizations. After his death, my grandmother kept up the store for a while. During the Great Depression, she extended credit to many people as these people, her neighbors, had little money and did need to feed their families. She was getting older and tired, and so the store was sold. As I had mentioned, my father's people had an inn in Salem, New Hampshire. My mother's folks came from southern Poland and their family had been farmers. My dad's folks came from Lodz, Poland, a textile city and there were also some relatives in Warsaw.

S: What attracted them to Lowell?

G: I am guessing that because there were people here from my grandparents' villages in Poland, Lowell seemed to be the place to go. But my uncle had told me that my grandmother's first glimpse of Lowell was not positive. She was to have said, "Oh my God, this can't be Lowell. This is dirty." She was about eighteen. But she later had no desire to return to Poland.

Z: Did your uncle mention any expectations they had before coming to Lowell?

G: No. I think that the expectation was that life would be better. In Poland, which was then partitioned into three parts, they were in the part called Galicia. Under Austrian rule, life seemed to be a bit better than in the other two parts, but still not an easy life. So I think that they believed that overall, economically and otherwise, life would be better in America.

Z: What kind of business did they have?

G: A grocery store. My mother worked there as a child.

Z: Did people in that community usually have businesses of their own or did they work for other people?

G: Well, I can tell you that people, not just of Polish backgrounds, had grocery stores. Lakeview Avenue, then a Polish neighborhood, had grocery stores, a bakery, a cobbler shop, barbershop. If you were ambitious and wanted your own business, you were going to service pretty much basic needs. People didn't have money for luxuries. Many people, of course, did work in the mills.

S: You mentioned your parents had an inn.

G: My grandparents did.

S: Oh your grandparents?

G: My father's parents had a small inn in Salem, New Hampshire when it was still quite rural. But there was the race track in Salem and the horse owners would come and stay at the inn for a while.

T: From your grandparents to your parents, how did they transfer their sense of being Polish?

G: Language is a way to transmit culture, as is attending churches affiliated with one's ethnic background. Holiday/holyday customs and observances is another major way. I do observe some of the customs. My brother comes to the traditional Christmas Eve dinner along with his wife of German/Scottish/Irish/English background and their two daughters who bring along a husband and boyfriend.

T: What are some of those customs you mentioned?

G: In the old days, Christmas Eve was a day of abstinence where we could eat no meat. So we do not have meat at the meal. I do serve pierogi, a kind of ravioli like dumpling, one kind having a potato and cheese filling, the other having a shredded cabbage filling. We also have a mushroom soup, fruit salad, etc. and fish. There should be twelve dishes in memory of the twelve apostles. One of the Easter customs is the blessing of the food. The priest used to come to homes on Holy Saturday to perform this ritual. Today the food is blessed in the parish hall. People come with decorated baskets, true works of art. Small lambs are made of butter and eggs are colored and decorated with designs. Polish sweetbreads have braided forms. My own basket is quite modestly decorated. The long exception to having a basket is my friend Frank who comes with his food in a Market Basket paper bag. Although religion is a great unifier in the community, in the early days of Polish immigration to Lowell, it split the community. The great majority of the people were Roman Catholics and they were saving money for a church. They wanted a Polish priest. Some felt that the Archdiocese of Boston was not very responsive. At that time, the Polish National Catholic Church was being organized in Scranton, PA, similar to the Roman Catholic faith but without allegiance to the Pope and with married priests. A representative from Scranton came and talked some people into forming a parish in Lowell. The National Catholic's first church was later sold to become St. Joseph's Lithuanian Roman Catholic Church. Then a church on Lakeview Avenue was built and called St. Casimir's Church. The majority of the Polish

remained Roman Catholic and their church, Holy Trinity, was opened in 1904. This parish also started the first Polish parochial school in the archdiocese. This has been my lifelong parish and it was almost closed about two years ago by the archdiocese. As of this date, it's still holding on. When the first religious rift happened, there were many hard feelings. And some split families.

That's a thing of the past. Our little group, the Lowell Polish Cultural Community, has people from both parishes, or different or no parishes, working together at the Folk Festival and at many activities we organize.

S: What is your sense of community now? Some ethnic communities feel that their communities are waning, that the younger generation is just not interested?

G: I agree. A wonderful thing about the U.S. is that people of different backgrounds marry. Often the married couple makes an attempt to follow the traditions of each other's ethnic community, but, in general, intermarriage may lead to a waning of the community.

S: Do you feel that a bit of "young blood" is coming in?

G: Post Solidarity there were Polish people coming and they continue to come. I think that in Lowell, you had three noted migrations. You had the great migration from Poland in the 1880-1910 period. There was a smaller influx around the 1930s, I think, when folk came from Newmarket, New Hampshire after the textile mills closed there. After World War II, you had a different kind of group coming. They engendered a new spark in the community. They were interested in keeping alive the great history and culture of Poland. In some cases, they came better educated than the first waves of immigrants. There is a Polish sense, but it's different.

S: How would you describe that? If I look at a community that has a strong Polish identity, I'm thinking of Pittsburg.

G: Not Chicago?

S: Pittsburg is just a place I'm more familiar with. How would you characterize the feeling in the community?

G: Well, the newer and newest people to come seem sort of more like technocrats, different still from all the earlier groups. As an example, one time at the JFK Plaza during the folk festival, we were selling our Polish food. Two of us were in native Polish costume. One of the more recent immigrants went by and waved. Our feeling, to our amusement, was that she would feel uncomfortable in the costume, and that it would represent something that was just so in the past. She and other newer immigrants do go to the Polish church, but it's difficult to describe how they are different, but there seems to be a difference. Nothing better or worse, just different.

Z: What do you think of the relationship between the Polish community and other groups?

G: Fine from my own personal experience. My grandfather had a house built in Centerville next door to a French-Canadian family. Mrs. Lajeunesse spoke no Polish, my grandmother spoke no

French, neither spoke much English, at least at first, and yet these women got along. I think that some groups were bound by a common religion. A tension that sort of lukewarmly existed was between the Polish and Lithuanians and had its roots in the history of the Middle Ages. Older people sometimes recall people calling them names or making fun of their Polishness and some might have felt prejudiced against when they attempted to get jobs. Again, I personally have not experienced prejudice.

S: Do you feel that there is maybe tensions between the older established groups and newer groups coming to Lowell?

G: I don't know. I wouldn't be surprised if there were, Lowell has clearly changed. This fact became dramatically evident to me when I brought my class from Arlington to Lowell on a field trip. We were on the trolley and passing Lowell High School during a fire drill. There seemed to be a majority of Asian and Latino kids milling around. When I went to Lowell High, my class of approximately five hundred included possibly four black kids and maybe one or two Asians, the rest being predominantly of white European background. One knew that the population was changing, but to see the whole school outside was to really appreciate the extent of the change. Not better, not worse, just a big change.

T: Do you have any sense about the political situation in the Polish community?

G: Political situations for most of the ethnic groups have been somewhat chronological. First we had the Yankee mayors, then eventually Lowell had an Irish mayor. At some further point in time, a French-Canadian was chosen as mayor, followed by the first Greek mayor and the first Polish mayor. Not too long ago, the first Cambodian in the nation elected to a municipal post was a city councilor in Lowell. As far as political party affiliation, the Irish became Democrats and everybody else registered as Republican, if only to get a chance to have some representation. Paul Tsongas' father was a known Republican though Paul, as we know, was not. When my mother's second cousin, who was mayor of Lowell, later ran for State Representative, he ran as a Republican. So people at first might have voted out of a sense of pride in one of their own, or to get a place at the table. Later, one's occupation, financial status, and a host of other considerations other than ethnicity dictated one's political choices.

T: In the generation of people you know, friends and family, do you see people aware of their ethnicity, but not thinking that it's very important?

G: That's pretty fair to say. But I know that my own nieces ask more questions about their Polish background now than they did as kids. That might be motivated by a sense of knowing themselves as individuals rather than an academic interest in Polish history or Polish-American history. It's perhaps a way of knowing your family better, or of developing a sense of family.

S: Were you able to travel to Poland?

G: I traveled to Poland. All of my mother's siblings were born in the U.S. My dad's two older brothers were born in Poland and came to America as babies. But my aunt, my mother's sister was passionate about Poland. She visited there right after World War I when Poland had just

become free. When I was in college, she wanted to go again to see relatives and to discuss some little patch of land there. She wanted me to go with her and I did. It was quite an experience and sometimes a bit scary. It was the time of the Cold War. There were only a few Americans there in Poland at the time, and to add to the suspense, our visas were revoked just as we were preparing to come back home.

T: The US revoked the visa or Poland?

G: Poland. Although I met a few Communists there, most were party members just to be able to hold a job. The only diehard Communists I met in Poland were an American woman and her Greek husband. They were doing the reverse of Radio Free Europe. I'd like to go to Poland again. Everything has so changed since I went as a college student. One of my treasured memories from my trip was an unplanned visit to my dad's aunt in Warsaw. She didn't know we were coming, but she recognized me instantly from photos which my paternal grandmother had mailed to her through the years.

Z: Well that's what I think I'd like to ask. How about you?

S: I think we have covered it. Thank you so much.

G: Oh you are welcome.